

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

SW

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1, 1994

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Pantex designated priority cleanup site

BY HOLLACE WEINER
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

The Pantex nuclear weapons plant was designated yesterday as the 29th Superfund cleanup site in Texas, over objections from Gov. Ann Richards, who lobbied against tagging the plant among the nation's top contaminated areas.

State and plant officials say that cleanup is under way and that Superfund status will add red tape, de-

lays and expense to the effort at the facility where U.S. nuclear bombs are dismantled. The facility is 17 miles northeast of Amarillo.

Citizen watchdog groups and the manager of the area's water conservation district applauded the move, noting that hazardous substances — such as tritium, chromium and gas byproducts — have leached “dangerously close” to the Ogallala

(More on PANTEX on Page 2)

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Pantex

From Page 1

Aquifer that irrigates the midwest and supplies water for Amarillo.

"In a sense this could put a stigma on us ... an undeserved stigma," said Tom Walton, Amarillo spokesman for the Energy Department. Mason & Hanger-Silas Mason Co. Inc., a private firm, runs the plant under a contract with the agency.

The Energy Department had argued against the Superfund designation, which places cleanup operations under the Environmental Protection Agency.

Superfund, a law passed in 1980 to clean up the nation's worst toxic-waste sites, includes sites such as Rocky Flats in Colorado and has been criticized for mounting legal costs and slow cleanups. The Superfund law requires companies that contributed to the pollution to pay for the cleanup.

Mavis Belisle, coordinator of the Peace Farm and a member of Save Texas Agriculture and Resources, a local citizens coalition, said the Superfund status is deserved.

"It means there's real reason to believe that there are potential or real health effects from this situation. This has been hanging in the air since summer of 1991. The delay has been inexcusable," she said.

The Superfund designation followed reports in May that the United States had temporarily halted its extensive program to dismantle nuclear weapons at Pantex after a series of failures in safety systems. The shutdown halted a plan to dismantle 2,000 weapons this year.

In July 1991, the EPA nominated 9,100-acres of the 16,000-acre

weapons plant to the Superfund list.

Toxic substances such as arsenic, lead, mercury and barium — which is used in rat poison — were detected at Pantex in ditches and shallow ponds where treated waste waters were once discharged.

Also contaminating the rural site are petroleum-based products — among them toluene, which is used in model airplane glue, and acetone, a degreaser. Depleted uranium, a low-level radioactive material, has also been found near a Pantex training area.

The state has worked with Pantex to monitor the problem, alter waste disposal practices and devise cleanup methods.

The EPA's decision to place Pantex on the Superfund list was formalized in yesterday's *Federal Register*.

"Designating Pantex as a federal Superfund site will not result in a cleaner or healthier facility," Richards wrote May 24 to EPA Administrator Carol Browner. "It will, however, threaten the state's ability to oversee and participate in the remediation."

"State oversight is essential to assuring the public that ground water in the area will not be endangered by Pantex's continued operations," Richards wrote.

She said designating Pantex as a Superfund site will ultimately cost taxpayers an additional \$50 million — without providing any additional increment of safety or environmental quality at the site.

Texas Superfund sites include an

area in White Settlement beneath the Lockheed plant and the former Carswell Air Force Base where a degreaser caused a plume of ground water contamination.

Two other local Superfund sites have been certified as cleaned up. Those were at the Pesses Chemical Co. in south Fort Worth and at Bio-Ecology, a toxic waste dump in Grand Prairie.

To clean the toxic substances detected beneath the Panhandle weapons plant, environmental technicians could pump out ground water or inject the soil with bacteria that eat toxic substances, said Tom Gustavson, senior research scientist at the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas at Austin.

C.E. Williams, manager of the Panhandle Groundwater Conservation District, which includes portions of six counties northeast of Amarillo, said most of the toxic wastes released at Pantex have percolated into the "perch" water.

These are pockets of water closer to the surface than the giant Ogallala Aquifer, which lies at a depth of 390 to 420 feet beneath Pantex. In 1988, the EPA found toluene in soils 329 feet below the surface.

"Although that perch aquifer has a clay layer which is a retarding layer, hopefully they can get it remediated before it migrates on down to the Ogallala," Williams said. "It's getting dangerously close."

Within the past six months, the Bureau of Economic Geology of the University of Texas in Austin reported that the level of tritium — a

radioactive isotope of hydrogen — had increased in a farmer's well in the perch level near the Pantex plant. Bureau officials said the tritium level is not hazardous and may be related to atmospheric testing in the 1950s and 60s.

This report contains material from The Associated Press.

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